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Ishtar: In Her Praise, In Her Image

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She was called Ishtar by the Babylonians, Inanna by the Sumerians, Astarte by the Greeks, and Ashtoreth by the Hebrews. She is a Goddess of Love and beauty, The Giver of All Life, The Maiden, The Mother, The Crone. As the maiden hymns were sung to her beauty and her love:

> "Praise the Goddess, most awesome
> of the Goddesses,
> Let one revere the mistress of the
> people, the greatest of the Gods.
> Praise Ishtar, the most awesome of
> the Goddesses,
> Let one revere the Queen of Women,
> the greatest of the Gods.

> She is clothed with pleasure and
> love.
> She is laden with vitality, charm
> and voluptuousness.

In lips she is sweet; life is in
her mouth.
At her appearance rejoicing
becomes full.
She is glorious; veils are thrown
over her head.
Her figure is beautiful; her eyes
are brilliant."

-from a First Dynasty Babylon text, circa 1600 BCE

The Goddess has her dark side too. In this portion of a Sumerian prayer to Inanna from Ur, circa 2300 BCE, she is the bringer of death. In the following lines, "the Powers" refer to the powers and duties assigned to the various cosmic entities at the moment of creation:

"My Queen, You who are guardian
of all the great Powers,
You have lifted the Powers, have
tied them to your hands,
Have gathered the Powers, pressed
them to your breasts.
You have filled the land with
venom like a serpent.
Vegetation ceases when you thunder
like Ishkur.
You who bring down the flood from
the mountains,
Supreme One who are the Inanna of
Heaven and Earth."

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is the word of Ishtar that causes Enlil to bring the Deluge upon her Children, and in the same legend she brings death not only to her people but her lover too: "When the glorious Ishtar raised an eye at the beauty of Gilgamesh, she said, 'Come, Gilgamesh, be thou my lover! Do but grant me thy fruit. Thou shalt be my husband, and I will be thy wife.'" But the hero refuses her, listing the fates of her other lovers:

"For Tamuz, the lover of thy
youth,
Thou has ordained wailing year
after year.
Having loved the dappled
Shepherd-bird,
Thou smotest him, breaking his
wing.
In the grove he sits crying, 'My
wing!'
Then thou lovedst a lion, perfect
in strength.
Seven pits and seven didst thou
dig for him.
Then a stallion didst Thou love,
famed in battle.
The whip, the spur, the lash Thou
ordainedst for him."

And rather than marry Ishtar, Gilgamesh went in search of immortality on his own.

Images of this Great Goddess from the land of the Tigris and Euphrates appear in many shapes and forms. Some of the earliest may be the clay or limestone figures discovered at the site known as Mureybit in what is today Syria. These figurines from hunter-gatherer villages of 8000 BCE range from the crude and stylized to the highly naturalistic. Like later images of Ishtar, these female divinities are depicted with their hands to their breasts. These ancient images of a goddess are not joined by a male God until a thousand years later and then he remains less important.

One common characteristic of the early images of Ishtar is the bird-like facial features. These features are also seen on images of the Goddess from the Thracian culture of what is today Bulgaria, the Vinca culture of the Central Balkans, and the Tisza culture of northeastern Hungary, circa 6000-5000 BCE. This bird Goddess of ancient eastern Europe, and the closely related Snake Goddess are frequently associated with the baking of sacred bread. Miniature temples made in the form of the Goddess contain scenes of baking bread being presided over by a priestess. Later, miniature Minoan temples contain images of a Goddess with the same bird-like features. The Greek Aphrodite is often associated with doves which are her symbol also. Like Aphrodite's consort was the Grain God Adonis, Ishtar is the consort of Tamuz, God of Grain and of bread. The "wailing year after year," in the above text refers to the annual death and subsequent resurrection of Tamuz the Grain God, the Mesopotamian equivalent of Adonis and Attis.

The pierced crown and ears of figures are also reminiscent of images in bone and clay from Bulgaria that date to 5000 BCE (Similar piercing can be seen on bird-faced figures of the Machalilla culture of ancient Ecuador and some of the Chancay "Moon Goddess" figures of central Peru). The pierced crown is repeated in the headdress of figures from Mycenae Greece. When Dr. Heinrich Schleimann discovered figures like these, some had their arms upraised while others had their hands to their hips forming a circular outline. He thought they might represent two phases of

the moon. Dr. Schleimann was probably right. The arms of the figure from a tomb form the crescent of the New Moon rising, an ancient symbol of Ishtar in her aspect as the moon Goddess. They also repeat the design of the Assyrian Moon Tree. These upraised arms from ancient Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

Like Cybele and Attis, Demeter and Persephone, Aphrodite and Adonis, and Isis and Osiris; Ishtar sought to retrieve her lover from the "house wherein the entrants are bereft of light, where dust is their fare and clay their food." When she arrived at the gate She demanded to be let in. The Gatekeeper at the command of Allatu, Queen of the Underworld and sister of Ishtar, allowed her to enter. As she passed through the first gate, however, she was told she must remove her crown as "that is the custom of Allatu". At the second gate she had taken the pendants from her ears; at the third the chains from her neck; at the fourth the ornament from her breast; at the fifth the Girdle of birthstones from her hips; at the sixth her bracelets and anklets; and at the seventh she had the garment removed from her body.

Allatu imprisoned Ishtar in the Underworld and because of her absence from the World of the living, "the bull springs not upon the cow, the ass impregnates not the jenny, the man lies in his own chamber and the maiden lies on her side." Because of this, the God Ea sent a messenger to Allatu and caused Allatu to sprinkle Ishtar with the waters of life. As Ishtar passed through each of the seven gates on her ascent, Her garments and her jewels were returned to her.

As for Tamuz, her beloved, his fate is not known according to the Summerian myth because the last tablet of the text is missing. In a Babylonian version of the myth, however, the Gatekeeper is told "Wash him with pure water, anoint him with sweet oil, clothe him with a red garment, and let him play on a flute of lapis." As the knowledge of her brought death, so death brought resurrection.

> "On the day that Tamuz comes up
> to me
> When with him the lapis flute and
> the carnelian ring come up to me,
> When with him the wailing men and
> the wailing women come up to me,
> May the dead rise and smell the
> incense!"

She was worshipped as a Goddess of Love and Beauty, a bringer of death and the mother of all life:

> "She is sought after among the
> Gods, extraordinary is her station,
> Respected is her word, it is
> supreme over them.
> Ishtar among the Gods,
> extraordinary is her station.
> Respected is her word, it is
> supreme over them."

-from a first Dynasty Babylonian text, circa 1600 BCE

The priestesses of Her temples were "harlots" detested by the Hebrews, but, in the words of The Great Goddess, "All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals." Ishtar is one of the earliest manifestations of The Great Goddess and the geographic boundaries of her worship may be far greater than is currently believed.

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